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ABSTRACT

There are no simple answers to the absentee problem, but the technical guides included in this document may provide a better understanding of the problem. These guides may be useful in determining the causes and indicating the ways in which a reduction in absenteeism may be achieved. Topics covered include a definition of absenteeism; a method of computing unexcused absence rates; a listing of the inschool, environmental, and personal reasons for absenteeism; and a set of procedures to combat unexcused absenteeism. These procedures include a lengthy list of steps management can take to improve attendance. (Author/IRT)

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ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism is a universal school problem in our society in varying degrees and for varying reasons. Growing concern of school districts manifests itself because of the increasing costs of absenteeism and because some of the factors that produce absenteeism may eventually lead to school termination. Improvements needed to reduce absenteeism may often reduce school terminations and dropouts.

The extent of administrative, staff and faculty time wasted because of student absenteeism has not been completely researched. However, a high rate of absenteeism has been recognized in many instances to be a symptom of poor supervision, management and administration leading to low morale, tardiness, inferior teaching, poor student achievement and excessive school terminations. Absenteeism is costly to school districts in loss of high student achievement, record keeping, pupil services, increased teacher costs, increased student orientation time and costs; and to the student, in loss of quality education experiences. It is highly disruptive of meeting educational goals. Many schools, in estimating absenteeism costs, equate every five percent of absenteeism to five percent of lost educational achievement and results.

Casual and unsystematic handling of the problem has made ineffective many activities and services aimed towards reducing absenteeism. Administrators must recognize that "student absenteeism" is their responsibility. Department

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chairmen and teachers must not be reluctant to report "loss of student achievement" resulting from absenteeism even though they might be held accountable for students over whom administration and parents have given them little control. Such factors lead to pyramiding costs to the school district. The costs of absenteeism can be identified. Overstaffing to offset absenteeism, lost student achievements, fluctuating quality, idle equipment and unused investments, disrupted schedules, shifting of teaching and clerical staff plus time spent by principals, counselors, deans and attendance workers to maintain records and deal with factors causing absenteeism and to provide solutions for the problem. There are no simple answers to the absentee problem, but the following technical guides may provide a better understanding to the problem. These guides may be useful in determining the causes and indicating ways in which a reduction in absenteeism may be achieved.

Increasingly, student discontent, as evidenced in classroom absence and even illness, has become a significant area to be explored. Studies of absenteeism should probe attitudinal and emotional factors, student protests, the role of counseling, attendance and administrative personnel in preventing or undermining school satisfaction, the needs of students and their fulfillment, and other psychological and sociological aspects of the school-student relationship.

DEFINITION OF ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism may be defined as the failure of students to report to school when they are scheduled for instruction. The term may include both authorized and unauthorized absences. In general, absenteeism includes loss of school time because of sickness, medical and dental appointments, or personal reasons.

This tell is concerned solely with unexcused absences of students from school, including family and personal reasons, truancy and other unauthorized absences.

Statistics show that students fall into three groups with respect to attendance: rarely or never absent; occasionally absent; and frequently absent. The latter account for the largest percentage of the absences and it is this group that must be analyzed to evaluate the causes and to determine possible alternatives.

COMPUTING UNEXCUSED ABSENCE RATES

The unexcused absence rates should be calculated each month to establish a seasonal pattern. The following formula is used to compute the rate of unexcused absences:

$$R = \frac{\text{Total O.A.}}{\text{Total O.A.} + \text{total A.A.}}$$

where

R = unexcused absence rate

O.A. = total number of days of
Absences Other than illness

A.A. = total number of days of attendance,
including illness absences and non-
attendance for professional services.

The unexcused absentee rate can be used chiefly as a relative measure of the attendance performance of departments and the total school.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ABSENTEEISM

There are no consistently uniform causes for absenteeism. Reasons vary from area to area, from school to school, and even between similar schools in the same general geographic area.

In-school factors that lead school separations are frequently causes of absenteeism, namely:

- Inadequate program selection and class assignment methods.
- Inadequate information about the school and learner's requirements and responsibilities.
- Lack of opportunity for recognition of individuality.
- Inadequate or poor direction and supervision.
- Lack of training programs.
- Ineffective grievance procedures.
- Lack of adequate facilities, equipment, supplies and services.
- unsatisfactory learning environment.
- Ineffective teaching.

In fact, almost any student problem can be considered a reason for absenteeism.

These problems can be grouped broadly into:

1. Situations in the school relationship that affect the attitude of students towards regular attendance.
2. External situations in the community (called environmental or socioeconomic).
3. Personal problems of the individual student. Some of the most prevalent are:

In School

1. Ineffective orientation or Indirection program.
2. Unsatisfactory school-student relations.
3. Lack of incentive educational programs and offerings.
4. No personal identification with school assignments.
5. Unclear school duties and responsibilities.
6. No sense of personal achievement and responsibility.
7. Personality conflicts between teachers and student.
8. Lack of motivation.
9. Fragmentation of instruction due to absences of regular teacher.
10. Poor educational preparation.
11. Inadequate rapport between counselor and student.
12. Little variety in daily and weekly scheduling of classes.
13. Inadequate Fine Arts program.
14. Task and subject repetitiveness.
15. Ineffective attendance monitoring system.
16. Unsound teacher/staff attitude towards attendance.
17. Inadequate parent orientation and education.
18. Ineffective communications between school, parent and students.
19. Inappropriate student transfer policies and procedures.

Environmental

1. Poor transportation arrangements.
2. Lack of facilities for child care, care of the aged and sick.
3. Lack of business, government and personal services at convenient out-of-school hours -- immigration, driver's licenses, traffic violations, welfare, probation, and employment service.
4. Lack of home service facilities -- telephone, laundry, etc.
5. Inclement weather conditions.
6. Strong competition from community events and out-of-building educational opportunities.

Personal

1. Medical -- illness of close family member.
2. Accidents -- to close family members.
3. Seeking employment.
4. Household duties.
5. Recreational activities.
6. Marital problems in the home.
7. Religious "Holy Days."
8. Habits -- drug addition, etc.
9. Legal, social or economic problems.
10. Poor self-image or other personality conflicts.
11. Disregarding unexcused absences as serious issue.
12. Perceived equity of attainment of rewards -- grades, recognition and opportunity for advancement.
13. Ethnic holidays.
14. Learning disability.

PROCEDURES TO COMBAT UNEXCUSED ABSENTEEISM

A consistent District policy is a necessity. To avoid the practice of making up rules as cases arise, the administration should establish guidelines that represent its goal of a reasonable approach to unexcused absences of students. Employee organizations and school-community-advisory councils must participate actively in the development and implementation of consistent attendance policies and procedures. These policies and procedures must include a sound human relations program, administrative, managerial and supervisory responsibilities, effective staff development, pre-service and in-service programs, keeping of complete and accurate records, and a clear and well-thought-out system dealing with methods for relating benefits and punitive actions to unexcused absence control. Rules must be enforced fairly and violations must be documented. The District must have the attendance of students among its top three priorities.

Priority One - The Students and Their Education

Priority Two - The Teacher and Staff

Priority Three - Attendance

Many school districts prepare a handbook for presentation to new employees covering school district policies and expectations of teachers, staff members and administrative personnel.

MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES

Management can improve attendance in a number of ways, including the following options:

1. Establish a consistent absence control and student retention program and policy.
2. Prepare and post or distribute bulletins and other such communications - for example, Spotlight, Student Handbooks, Posters, letters to parents and students, and envelope notices to employees - and hold principal, staff and departmental meetings to inform teachers, attendance workers, PSA Counselors of District attendance policies, plans and procedures.
3. Inform all levels of supervision and management of the nature, details, and objectives of the absence control and student retention policy and program.
4. Provide training in absence control to all staff levels.
5. Make teacher and administrative association cooperation a part of the policy and program.
6. Administer the program consistently and without discrimination.

7. Make changes only as they are desirable or necessary.
8. Give counselors, department chairmen and teachers authority to deal first with attendance problems.
9. Keep lines of communications open with all students and parents.
10. Formulate grievance procedures and establish a committee of peers to assist in the resolution process.
11. Improve procedures and techniques for:
 - a. Student orientation and induction program.
 - b. Course selection and placement.
 - c. Small-group attendance counseling.
 - d. Follow-up on borderline absentees.
12. Prepare, maintain and have available current and accurate course offerings.
13. Establish a system of peer-aides or counselors to help new students solve personal problems before they interfere with study programs.
14. Establish a system of penalties which differentiates between those rarely absent and chronic absentees.
15. Formulate progressive remedial procedures for repeated offenses, for example:
 - a. Notification of students of impending action.
 - b. Reprimand - first verbal, then written warning.
 - c. Parent-School-Youth Conference.
 - d. Suspension from regular classes.
 - e. Detention.
16. Formulate other remedial procedures such as:
 - a. Partial loss of course credit.
 - b. Saturday or after-school hours make-up time and work.
 - c. Withholding athletic participation.

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17. Establish a summer school plan for completing class work missed during cumulative absences during school year.
18. Establish a policy of No Finals for perfect attendance under strictly controlled academic conditions.
19. Provide an attendance bonus, such as one-day-free-study time on campus or volunteer work in community for sixty consecutive days of attendance. (This more often becomes a reward for good attendance than a deterrent to habitual tardiness or absenteeism.)
20. Establish an ongoing recreation and Fine Arts program on campus during Nutrition and Noon Hour.
21. Give time off (half-day) to explore career fields in nearby industry, business and governmental agencies.
22. Follow up absentees by letter or home visits.
23. Prepare and evaluate exit interviews.
24. Keep accurate and complete records in sufficient detail to support consistent administration of benefits and penalties.
25. Require review of records at regular intervals by principal, counselor, department head, and area superintendent.
26. Establish a counseling program in cooperation with trained attendance personnel. (It may also include the school nurse, clinical psychologists, or a minister who can be full-time or part-time employees or volunteers.)
27. Provide sources of assistance, on campus, for addicts and for various types of therapy.
28. Establish an on-campus Absenteeism Control Unit to effect maximum attendance of students and an optimum communication program:
 - a. Probation
 - b. Department of Public Social Service

c. Immigration (Selected Schools)

d. Pupil Services and Attendance Counselor

e. Parent-Student-Teacher Association

f. Police Department

g. Department of Motor Vehicles (Driver's tests)

h. Other local community agencies

29. Absence follow-up including home visits by school area and District health personnel after return to school.

30. Cooperation with community groups concerned with health, crime, safety and employment.

SUPERVISORY PROCEDURES

Special training should be given on absenteeism problems and methods of handling them. The principal and the assigned attendance personnel should be given authority to deal with students who show signs of becoming absentee problems.

A few of the options a principal can take to improve attendance are:

1. Impress upon new and continuing students the established procedures for informing the school of absence or tardiness when there is advanced knowledge that the student will not be in school, or a call in at the start of the school day, or, in emergencies, no later than sometime during the first day of absence. Repeated offenses or abuses of this requirement should result in a parent-school and/or youth-counselor conference or loss of credit.
2. Prepare and forward monthly absence report to PSA Counselor and Supervisor.
3. Hold a personal interview with the student immediately upon his return to class. (Helps establish right attitude by giving student a sense of responsibility.)
4. Take positive corrective action rather than punitive measures.

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5. Post good attendance records on bulletin board.
6. Confer regularly with PSA Counselor, principal counselor, and the teacher on problem cases.
7. Arrange for medical or counseling advice. An alert teacher and attendance worker recognize signs of strain or illness.
8. Make sure a student has been placed properly in classes. (Transfer to another class or teacher may be the answer.)
9. Maintain good study condition, both in physical surroundings and equipment and in emotional atmosphere.
10. Allocate privileges as a reward for good attendance.
11. Provide and encourage communication with students by continuously evaluating progress, offering encouragement, directing trends and taking remedial action when required.
12. Foster a sense of participation in the school's program.
13. Make sure that students understand school attendance policies, plans and programs.
14. Work with counselors and aides to assist students with personal or school-related problems.

RECORD-KEEPING PROCEDURES

Accurate and complete records are required. It is essential to know which students are absent, how often they are absent, and why they are absent.

Record keeping means compiling and summarizing records about individual students, departments, and the entire school to spot trouble sources and to identify causes and trends. Records are signals - they indicate prevailing conditions. They are guides for remedial action. Most schools keep cumulative records of each student's absence and many of them also record absences by the reason for occurrence. Schools which maintain full and up-to-date absence records have discovered enough ways to use and follow up their records to make them a worthwhile investment. Among the many purposes served by these records are the following:

1. School administration can determine the extent of the absentee situation for the school as a whole and from this decide whether the school's problem is of a serious magnitude. Trends in absenteeism can be evaluated in relation to economic conditions.
2. The reasons for individual absences can be compiled and investigated. In that process, solutions to the problem can be determined, especially for those due to conditions within the school.
3. The records provide one measurement of the degree of each teacher and counselor's effectiveness as reflected by each individual teacher's, counselor's and department chairman's absence records. This knowledge can, in turn, help the District staff member do a better job.
4. Periodic evaluation of the records can measure the effectiveness of an absence control system. Why, when so many schools attest to their effectiveness, does one hear frequent objections to absence records?

The objections most often voiced revolve around issues of cost, useless paper work and dull statistics.

The responsibility for keeping the records may be assigned to the organizational department, to the school administrator's office, or to both.

Some school districts assign record keeping to a special pupil statistic department or to the Controlling Division at the District level while individual schools maintain an attendance accounting and services office to handle records.

Some of the reports that should be made are listed below:

1. Daily reports should include such information as the student's name, department, date, social security number or school identification number, reason for absence or tardiness, and if possible, the expected date of return to school. A comment section, indicating action being taken, or other recommendations, may be helpful.
2. Reports should be tabulated weekly and monthly. The monthly report will indicate the school, department, major or single subject field emphasis, reasons, length of time enrolled, age group, sex, also number of school days during session, number of student days lost through absence during session, average number of students enrolled during session, and rate of absenteeism.
3. Another report can be prepared using data from the daily report such as date, student's name and identification number, department, counselor, and reason for absence.
4. An analysis of numbers two and three, above, will indicate possible problem areas and factors which indicate the need for disciplinary or corrective measures.

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5. The summary analysis should be made available to all levels of teaching, supervision and administration.
6. Individual absence and tardiness reports should be entered in the student's cumulative records as well as on a student attendance record card. With widespread use of computers for keeping track of all types of information, data regarding a single student or departmental attendance pattern can be easily retrieved.